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ABSTRACT

This document reviews research on the factors affecting the retention of adult students, discusses the relevance of some attrition models for adults, and presents strategies for helping adults adapt to the university and for adapting the university to adults. Reviewing factors affecting retention, the digest says that student characteristics, circumstances, and the educational environment affect adult students' persistence and participation in higher education and suggests that since educators have so little influence over the first two of those factors, they had better concentrate on the third. Among the writers cited are those who believe that educational institutions are "out of sync" with adult students, that many adults attend school for reasons other than obtaining academic degrees (making "degree obtained" an irrelevant measure of persistence), and that institutions have taken three approaches toward adult programs (only one of which places the programs in the mainstream of the institution). The most relevant implications of several retention studies are presented in a review of retention models and adult students. A section on helping adults adapt to the university lists situational factors and psychological influences that affect persistence, as well as services and interventions that can help alleviate problems. The section on adapting the university to adult students lists eight program and instructional strategies to enhance retention and five techniques aimed at making the institutional environment more flexible. Eleven references appear. (CML)

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RETAINING ADULT STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The presence of adult students in higher education is no longer an emerging trend but a reality. Retaining these students requires a change in perspective among educators and administrators accustomed to dealing with the traditional-age student population. "The concept of persistence or retention must be thought of differently for adults" (Pappas and Loring 1985, p. 139). Defining retention in terms of program (degree) completion is relevant only for some. Adult students have diverse characteristics and life circumstances that affect their participation in education. As they handle multiple roles and responsibilities, the student role is often secondary. They have more and varied past experiences, are more concerned with practical application, and have greater self-determination and acceptance of responsibility (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering 1989).

This ERIC Digest reviews research on the factors affecting retention. The relevance of some attrition models for adults is discussed. Strategies in two areas are presented: helping adults adapt to the university and adapting the university to adults.

Factors Affecting Retention

Participation and persistence result from the interaction of a variety of student characteristics, circumstances, and the educational environment. Because educators have limited influence over the first two categories, perhaps a more effective way to improve retention is to change the institution's perspective and attitude toward adults as students. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) claim that educational institutions are "out of sync" with adult students (p. 8). They recommend that educators and student services personnel adopt the attitude of Schoen's reflective practitioner, changing the way they view adult learners and educational environments.

Pappas and Loring (1985) categorize adult students as degree seekers, problem solvers, and enrichment seekers. Although persistence is usually viewed longitudinally, they suggest that this perspective applies only to degree seekers. They propose a cross-sectional perspective that considers retention successful if students achieve their objectives for participating. Murray and Uhl (1988) suggest analyzing adult, nontraditional students' enrollment patterns differently, including reentry points that take into account "stopping out" (temporary withdrawal from school), short-term study, and similar adult participation modes.

Several writers (Ackell 1982; Pappas and Loring 1985; Schlossberg et al. 1989; Tinto 1987) cite the marginality of adult programs in higher education. Ackell identifies three approaches: the "laissez faire" stage involves no organized services or efforts for adults; the "separatist" approach has a clearly segregated adult or evening unit with low status, separate faculty, and little integration with "regular" campus life; the "equity" stage includes active recruitment of adults, appropriate delivery systems, integrated curriculum and faculty, flexible services--in short, adult programs that are in the mainstream of the institution.

Retention Models and Adult Students

Marginality is a central concept of one of the primary models of student retention. Tinto's (1987) theory emphasizes that important predictors of persistence are academic integration (academic performance) and social integration (participation in college life). Recently, researchers have begun to apply this model to adult, nontraditional populations, with mixed results.

A national 9-year study (Stoecker, Pascarella, and Wolfle 1988) supports the importance of the fit between the person and the college environment as a retention factor. Weidman's (1985) results in applying Tinto's theory to female welfare recipients in a community college suggest that for adults, the model should also consider pressures external to the educational setting. Starks (1987) proposes restructuring the model for returning women; she finds that, for adults, it is more relevant to define academic integration as intellectual development than good grades, and that social integration means contact with fellow students, group work, and studying together more than participation in campus activities.

Walleri and Peglow-Hoch (1988) cite a number of studies that found inconsistencies in Tinto's model when applied to nontraditional populations, suggesting that persistence is independent of integration into campus life. In particular, Metzner and Bean (1987) find that nontraditional students do not attend for socialization purposes; instead, their model shows dropout most affected by grade point average, commitment as indicated by number of credit hours taken, and utility to future employment. However, Walleri and Peglow-Hoch propose that the inconsistencies are due to the diversity of adult students as well as to the way student progress is tracked. Their investigation of a guided studies program for academically underprepared adults indicates that successful students had close relationships with faculty, access to counseling, shared values and good relationships with other students, and specific career goals.

Perhaps the most relevant implications of these studies for retaining adults are as follows: (1) recognize that the persistence of diverse groups is affected by different factors and target retention efforts appropriately; (2) prior to or after enrollment, help adults clarify their academic and career goals; and (3) recognize that students' objectives are not necessarily degree oriented and measure retention success accordingly.

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Helping Adults Adapt to the University

Situational factors that affect persistence include role conflict, time management, family and work problems, economics, and logistics. Adults facing such circumstantial barriers need services that will enhance their academic adjustment by allowing them to concentrate on the student role, such as (1) assistance with transportation and child care (which Schlossberg et al. [1989] recommend expanding to family care for those responsible for both their children and their parents); (2) alternatives to stopping out, such as independent study, correspondence courses, contract learning; and (3) creative financial aid that might include flexible payment plans and tuition reimbursement.

Psychological influences include coping skills, self-confidence and self-image, anxiety about schooling based on prior experience, and beliefs or expectations about outcomes. Solutions might be communication of accurate, timely information stressing anticipated benefits and realistic expectations; special attention to advising and counseling; training advisors to deal with adults; basic skills assessment; developmental assessment (setting long- and short-term goals and reality testing); learning and study skills; placement testing; mentoring by successful adult students; peer support groups; and prioritizing life roles.

Many institutions present this information systematically in orientation seminars. The College of New Rochelle's introductory seminar is targeted to two different populations--middle-class, female suburban students and minority, urban, poverty-level students--with appropriate variations and emphases (Chelala and Dance 1984). For the three stages of transition in the return to higher education, Schlossberg et al. (1989) propose an appropriate intervention: (1) for moving in, an Entry Education Center to coordinate the full range of entry services and programs; (2) for moving through, an Adult Learner Support Center; and (3) for moving on, culminating programs that allow review of the educational experience, reevaluation of career and life plans, assistance with exit barriers, and referral to transition groups.

Adapting the University to Adult Students

Program and instructional strategies to enhance retention include the following:

- o High-quality instruction that includes close correspondence between instructional and student objectives
- o Faculty training in working with adult learners
- o Involvement of adult students in program governance, including demonstrated responsiveness to student evaluation of courses and programs
- o Computerized progress tracking system
- o Expanded academic day, week, and year (e.g., use the noon hour, offer 6-week modules, Sunday classes)
- o Expanded locations (classes in shopping malls, courses broadcast to businesses, hospitals, military bases)
- o Program continuity with links to prerequisite and succeeding programs
- o Credit for prior learning

The key word for change in the institutional environment is flexibility. Techniques include the following:

- o High-quality and accessible student support services, with extended office hours
- o Admissions processes that consider appropriate, contemporary assessments of adult potential
- o Hassle-free registration and scheduling
- o Career planning and placement
- o Establishment of rituals and symbols that form a sense of shared meaning and connectedness among students, faculty, and staff

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